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## Ask the Beasts of the Southern Wild: Exploring Human Identity as Beast, Being and Beholder in Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love and Beasts of the Southern Wild

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# Ask the Beasts of the Southern Wild: Exploring Human Identity as Beast, Being and Beholder in *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

## **Abstract**

Anthropocentrism and hierarchical dualism together encourage a dangerous anthropology where human primacy among creation and the prioritization of certain humans leads to destruction for all. During a time when suffering caused by climate change continues to intensify, it is increasingly important to find compelling ways to share the stories of those who suffer most. I will explore how *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlin, 2012) contextualizes the ecofeminist theology found in Johnson's *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (2014), specifically the idea of humans identifying as beasts, beings and beholders. Furthermore, I will discuss how the representation of reality in the film is meaningful to viewers because it sacramentalizes the human experience from which Johnson's theology is born. Through the eyes of Hushpuppy, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*'s young, female protagonist, viewers realize just how interconnected is the plight of the planet, the poor and all who lack places of privilege.

## **Keywords**

Anthropocentrism, Ecofeminism, Christian Theology

## Introduction

During a time when suffering caused by climate change and environmental degradation continues to intensify, it is increasingly important to find compelling ways to share the stories of those who suffer most. Ecological feminist theology critiques the hierarchical, dualistic, human-centered structures and thought processes that create and contribute to unjust realities. Catholic Christian theology further centers this critique in relation to the will of God. Hierarchical dualism and anthropocentrism together encourage a dangerous anthropology where human primacy in creation and the prioritization of certain humans leads to destruction for all. By utilizing the aesthetic appeal and sacramentalizing nature of cinematic masterpieces such as Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)<sup>1</sup> to inform thought-provoking ecofeminist theologies such as Elizabeth Johnson's in *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (2014),<sup>2</sup> one approaches the moral imperative to care for creation with renewed insight into the shared human experience of being a beast, being, and beholder of God's glorious world. By engaging ecofeminist theology with film theory, I show how *Beasts of the Southern Wild* animates and contextualizes the theological claims of *Ask the Beasts*, specifically the claim of humans identifying as beasts, beings, and beholders. Through the eyes of Hushpuppy, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*'s young, female protagonist, viewers realize just how interconnected is the plight of the planet, the poor, and all who lack places of privilege. Inspiring stories of hope exist: stories of humble strength, quiet

power, and forceful love that transcend the dichotomies set up by hierarchical dualism and demand a more egalitarian and holistic reality with their paradoxical truths. These are the stories that must be shared. These are the stories encountered if one asks the beasts of the southern wild.

### **The Film**

While not overtly theological, the 2012 Oscar-nominated film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*'s portrayal of both human and non-human creation and their interactions and influences upon each other provides a glimpse into the divine interconnectedness of all creation and the unique identity of human as beast, being, and beholder. In allowing the film to sacramentalize this interconnectedness and identity, one can engage both the film and theology in conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Zeitlin says that the film evolved from a desire to celebrate the stories of people he met in Louisiana while working on his prior short-film, *Sea of Glory* (2008).<sup>4</sup> With over half the cast of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* hailing from Louisiana bayou communities, many of these inspiring individuals appear in the film: lead actress Quvenzhané Wallis (Hushpuppy)<sup>5</sup> and lead actor Dwight Henry (Wink)<sup>6</sup> among them. The 65-member film crew also included Louisiana residents. It is not only the people involved with *Beasts of the Southern Wild* that reflect Zeitlin's desire to celebrate this community, but also the film set. Shooting took place outside of New Orleans, making the post-Hurricane Katrina-esque landscape

of the imaginary Bathtub community not entirely fictitious. The plot of the film can be summarized as follows.

Five-year-old Hushpuppy lives with her dad, Wink, and a small community in the Bathtub, a fictional bayou off the coast of a Louisiana-esque landmass. The Bathtub's inhabitants, who live in shanty-houses and survive off the land, are separated from the industrialized society of the main coast by a large levy which threatens to flood the Bathtub's inhabitants out of their homes (and possibly their lives). Most of the time, the levy does not cause problems, but when it rains, one's position relative to the levy becomes a matter of life and death.

Ms. Bathsheba (Gina Montana) teaches Hushpuppy and her classmates about impending global issues that, if ignored, will have deadly effects on the Bathtub community. She explains that the polar ice caps are melting and causing water levels to rise. Because of the levy, the rising water will completely consume the Bathtub. Not long after this lesson in global climate change, a huge storm hits the Bathtub, entirely flooding the land and forcing inhabitants who did not flee to construct a floating residence from salvaged resources. Unfortunately, even with shelter, the effects of the storm suggest danger for the Bathtub's inhabitants—plants and animals soon begin to die. If the Bathtub becomes a wasteland of death and decay, how will Hushpuppy, Wink, and their friends survive? The mainland, north of the levy, is unaffected.

Amidst the struggle to preserve the Bathtub, Hushpuppy faces the threat of her own personal “end of the world,” the death of her dad. Wink’s increasing fatigue and illness defeat his attempts to shield Hushpuppy from his worsening heart disease. Hushpuppy understands the laws of nature, but life without her dad around to take care of her is unimaginable. After realizing her own competence at not just caring for herself, but caring for others, Hushpuppy faces her biggest fear as if it were an old friend.

### **Ecofeminist Theology**

The social and ecological justice issues represented in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* make it a fruitful dialogue partner for ecofeminist theology, recognizing that the same logic of domination which allows one to posit that males are superior to females also allows one to posit that humans are superior to nature or that the elite are superior to the impoverished. While critique of gender-based dualities serves as feminism’s starting point, ecofeminist theology challenges all dualities which prove harmful to creation’s peaceful and fruitful coexistence.<sup>7</sup>

The logic of domination which ecofeminist theology challenges is supported by Western culture’s dominant worldview of hierarchical dualism, a conceptual framework which encourages one to conceive of the world in binary structures with inherently embedded prejudices. While some may claim that a structure can be dualistic without being hierarchical, history has proven that this is

rarely (never?) true. Dualistic systems are usually constructed in a way that offers preference to one part over the other. Hierarchical systems venture beyond mere preference and typically assign higher *value* to items higher on the scale,<sup>8</sup> resulting in a rigid framework that limits possibilities and predetermines worth.<sup>9</sup> Feminism focuses on challenging this type of dualistic construct and questioning existing social structures built upon this prominent way of understanding the world.<sup>10</sup>

To eradicate inequality caused by dichotomous thinking, the system of hierarchical dualism itself must be removed and replaced with something more advantageous. Egalitarian holism is the conceptual framework that best embodies the mission of ecofeminism and provides for the livelihood and flourishing of all.

Egalitarian holism is a type of consciousness that affirms that all of nature is interdependent and interconnected, an interlocking and delicate web of diversity. Every facet of each ecosystem that comprises the biosphere has inherent worth. Egalitarian holism does not promote equality among species that reduces everything to sameness. Each has a role to play in Earth's web of life.<sup>11</sup>

By displacing androcentrism and anthropocentrism, the male and the human are removed from privileged stations on the ladder of hierarchical dualism and the female and non-human nature are removed from low-valued positions. While within hierarchical dualism, components are placed along a line with ends that correspond to increased or decreased levels of importance, egalitarian holism values all components equally, on a single plane of existence. Some argue that this denies or ignores obvious differences; this is not so. Rather, egalitarian holism

allows for recognition of the importance of each part and the role it fulfills within the flourishing of the whole.

Ecofeminism therefore presents an invitation to something radical: conversion of mind and heart from a largely unchallenged hierarchical dualism and androcentric anthropocentrism to a new egalitarian holism ... Ecofeminist egalitarian holism is not a romantic and utopian wish, as its critics sometimes argue. It is an ideal to strive for. As an ideal, it promotes the potential of living species for the optimum of life of which they are capable.<sup>12</sup>

Within egalitarian holism, the optimum of life for one cannot be actualized by the suppression or domination of another. The flourishing of one part sets in motion a ripple effect that travels through, in, around, and among all others. Likewise, when one part is diminished or destroyed, it negatively affects all others. Humans must learn to equally regard and value all expressions of human nature and non-human nature if they want to preserve all in existence and promote its future flourishing.

This study will operate within a specifically Christian ecofeminist theology as presented in Elizabeth Johnson's 2014 book *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. Johnson explains the theological necessity of ecofeminism with recognition of the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of all creation as well as the specific evolutionary path of the human from **beast**, to **being**, to **beholder**. She brings Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* into dialogue with the Nicene Creed to argue for the interconnectedness of creation and humanity's role in seeking its survival and fulfillment through these three identities.



### ***Humanity as Beast***

Arguments can be made about the inherent value of all creation due to the fact that it is within the environment of non-human creation and among the company of non-human creatures in which humanity resides. However, this understanding of creation's value emerges from a traditionally anthropocentric viewpoint favored throughout history in which non-human creation's value is recognized because of its relation to humanity. Johnson challenges her readers to take a different approach.

It entails stepping outside the usual theological conversation with its presumption of human superiority in order to place a different 'other' at the center of attention. The effort to approach other species with concentrated attention to their story in all its struggle and delight creates an important shift in perspective. The result changes not just what one may think about the creatures themselves, but sets up a challenging dynamic that reconfigures all of theological interpretation so that it honors their lives.<sup>13</sup>

In Judeo-Christian scripture, God reflects on each creative act as good (Genesis 1); who are we to decide otherwise? Creation is praiseworthy in and of itself, humanity notwithstanding. Fortunately for humans, we also belong to this great community of creation. The human is one beast among many.

Humanity's intricately woven place within an already grand design allows the human to hold its own particular value and purpose. This insight can be reached by beginning this discussion with the human, but the tone of the inquiry would be notably altered. To adequately expand the theological landscape we roam, "the

focus has to shift to those who have been silenced, so that their voices are heard and they are seen as of central importance in themselves.”<sup>14</sup> When these voices are heard, focus can then turn toward the human with acute awareness of where it is situated within the complex community of creation.

### ***Humanity as Being***

Identifying as beast allows one to ponder humanity’s similarities with other creations, but what about its differences? What makes the human unique? In Johnson’s view, “In their own way [human beings] share all the facets of relationship to the living God described above, with the added note of capacity for profound moral and spiritual responsiveness.”<sup>15</sup> In a more complex way than in any other creature, the self-aware human being possesses the ability to make decisions informed by reflecting on the past and reasoning through the possible future. “Their presence makes a huge difference to the world of life,”<sup>16</sup> because human beings can know the effect of their own existence. For this reason, humans have a responsibility to make moral decisions in favor of creation’s flourishing.

The time is past when humans could ignore the impact of their behavior on the rest of life and on the ecological systems that support all living beings...Inspired by the Spirit who pervades and sustains the community of creation, the human imagination grows to encompass ‘the other’ and the human heart widens to love the neighbors who are uniquely themselves, not human... In the teeth of the ongoing ruination of the tree of life, faith in the living God can be a spur to action that makes a difference.<sup>17</sup>

In this Christian theological perspective, as beings fully aware and fully capable, humanity has the power and responsibility to ensure that creation lives.

### ***Humanity as Beholder***

Beyond existing in relationships of mutual dependence, beyond recognizing ability and responsibility, the human can behold the splendor of creation, basking in the glory that is the dwelling place of God. As beholders, every observation made about the world in which one lives is more than a scientific discovery: it can be viewed as an encounter with the divine. The human identity as beholder has manifested itself throughout history. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, the biblical beholder Moses observed and recorded in the first five books of the Bible his experiences of the divine for future generations. The scientific beholder Charles Darwin paid meticulous attention to detail and relationship among creation's components. The theological beholder Elizabeth Johnson finds God through wonder and awe at the created world. No matter what form one's beholding may take, beholding involves observing truth.

Once one understands the human as beast, being, and beholder, it becomes clear that no one aspect of creation (or subgroup within a species) can authentically claim to be more valuable than another. Therefore, the conceptual framework of hierarchical dualism can never be an adequate way of encountering the world.

Hierarchical dualism denies the inherent interconnectedness and mutual dependence of various parts of creation upon each other. It favors an emphasis on unequal levels of power, without also recognizing an increased level of responsibility—those which hold the less preferred placement within the dichotomy are deemed worthy of the ill-lot which they are dealt. Hierarchical dualism dictates what is worthy of beholding, severely limiting the ways in which one might encounter God.

On the contrary, egalitarian holism recognizes the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of various parts of creation upon each other. Egalitarian holism demands that one acts to promote restorative wholeness and a return to right relation among all of creation. Egalitarian holism beholds each component of the natural world, the community of creation, and the transcendent divinity loving it all into existence as equally marvelous, wonderful, and awesome. As beasts, as beings, and as beholders, Christians must adopt the conceptual framework of egalitarian holism if they take the loving mission as people of God and disciples of Jesus Christ seriously. Humans are beasts connected to all existence, beings who have evolved to a unique state of self-awareness, moral attentiveness, and intentional action, and beholders who glorify God by glorifying all creation.

## Encountering the Film

From an ecofeminist perspective, viewers of the film can ask themselves: What is the intended relationship between humans and non-human nature, between the elite and the impoverished? How are humanity and non-human existence affecting each other? How am I called to respond to social and ecological injustice? A Third Cinema<sup>18</sup> trajectory raises further questions: Whose unrepresented story is being voiced by this narrative? What are they saying? Why are their stories being silenced in reality? How can we hear and respond to them moving forward? As Zeitlin strives to tell the story of a forgotten bayou community, ecofeminist theology strives to tell the stories of the earth and marginalized peoples as integral parts of the stories of humanity and God.

The film encourages a particular perspective, with strategic camera angles, mise-en-scene, editing and audio. The Bathtub is depicted as existing in chaotic harmony while the mainland exists as an organized disaster. Hushpuppy's voiceovers add commentary and cuts to mythical creatures punctuate the storyline. The narrative of the film is powerful, but it is the cinematic representation of Hushpuppy's story that efficaciously invites ecofeminist theology to the discussion.

After the introductory credits, an establishing shot reveals a dilapidated shanty-house on stilts, surrounded by rubble and grassy marshland. The day is sunny, but the next shot requires eyes to adjust to the shanty's dimly lit interior. A close-up of small, dirty fingers molding a pile of mud into a cup shape fills the

screen. The mud cup is meant to be a nest for the small bird that is firmly, yet lovingly, grasped in the other small hand of the child to which these fingers belong: Hushpuppy. She sets the bird atop the roost she formed, but its tiny talons do not take hold. After examining the bottom of the bird and the cup-shaped mud-nest, Hushpuppy pats the top of the mound more forcefully—as one pats a pillow in preparation for sleep—and tries again to place the creature atop its throne. The bird settles into the nook created especially for it, seemingly content. The child, clad in a grungy, white tank top, orange underwear and oversized white rain boots, reacts to a clanging dinner bell and hops about outside the shack, where items of use and debris are indistinguishable from each other. Animals, wild and domesticated, hop about the filth as well. Everything is dirty.

Viewers from the developed world may cringe at this opening scene, wondering why anyone would live this way. Yet, like the bird on its muddy throne, the child seems content. This ramshackle collection of materials and the marshy environment wherein they reside are her home. Viewers are soon informed of the reason for this post-apocalyptic existence in a voiceover from the child as she beholds the horizon line of her beloved Bathtub community in comparison to the horizon line of the developed community to the north.

HUSHPUPPY: Daddy says, up above the levee, on the dry side, they're afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off. They think we all gonna drown down here, but we ain't goin' nowhere. The Bathtub has got more holidays than the whole rest of the world. Daddy always says that up in the dry world,

they got none of what we got. They only got holidays once a year. They got fish stuck in plastic wrappers. They got their babies stuck in carriages. And chicken on sticks and all that kind of stuff. One day, the storm is gonna blow, the ground is gonna sink and the water is gonna rise up so high there ain't gonna be no Bathtub, just a whole buncha water. But me and my daddy, we stay right here. We's who the earth is for.

Images and sounds here and throughout the film mirror Hushpuppy's sentiments that the Bathtub is indeed more desirable than the mainland. Immediately after leaving Hushpuppy's shanty-home, viewers observe a vast, empty waterscape with a sliver of land separating sea and sky. Hushpuppy and Wink reside at the center of this scene, floating in a motorboat fashioned out of an old truck bed. Viewers hear water lapping at the sides of the boat. After several seconds, a mechanical buzz begins to drown out the sound of the waves. The camera changes perspective, now showing the boat and its passengers insignificant and off-center against a looming backdrop of concrete levy, industrial buildings, and billowing smoke stacks. Water near the levy is polluted with debris. Mechanical clinking and clanking increases. This juxtaposition of horizon lines surfaces throughout the film. Each time the mainland appears more displeasing. Perhaps this is because viewers fall increasingly in love with Hushpuppy's colorful, organic, interconnected, egalitarian world.

Near the end of the film, the Bathtub inhabitants are forcefully evacuated from their homes by law enforcement from the mainland and taken to a health clinic/homeless shelter north of the levee. Here, the differences between

Hushpuppy's reality in the Bathtub and the reality of the mainland community come into sharper focus. The dinginess of the mainland's monochromatic horizon cannot be detected at this close encounter. It is masked by an artificial environment of stark white and clean lines. The unnatural sterility and cramped quarters remind Hushpuppy of "a fish tank with no water." Like the color scheme, life here is monotonous. Everyone appears to be unhappy and out of place.<sup>19</sup>

The food served at the cafeteria is as artificial as the environment. The single, perfectly circular pancake resting motionless on each resident's vastly empty tray presents a stark contrast to the "buffet of the universe" to which Hushpuppy is accustomed. Meals in the Bathtub have been repeatedly presented as great communal feasts, with fish, lobsters, crabs, and crawfish strewn across the table or floor, wriggling about until human hands snatch them off the piles. There are no plates or predetermined portions. There is no color scheme or schedule. People are talking and laughing and feasting together. Everyone radiates joy and belonging.

Viewers find themselves faced with a conundrum: to accept or reject the filmic reality is to accept or reject the state of the world in which they themselves reside. "They said that we were [in the clinic/shelter] for our own good," Hushpuppy says of social workers. Sympathetic viewers want to believe this to be true. How could these people, blinded by the sterile smog of their human-made infrastructure, possibly know the clarity of vision that accompanies a life lived in



intimate connection with creation? While those who live amongst industrialization extend a well-intentioned hand to those whom they presume to be in need, it is only to forcefully grasp their wrists and drag them into an existence they do not want to join. To call the inhabitants of the mainland “privileged” seems inappropriate, for both the narrative and the visual representation point to the Bathtub community as those who are truly fortunate and fulfilled.

Ecofeminism suggests that feelings of fulfillment among the Bathtub community abide because these people live acutely aware of their interconnectedness with their surroundings. Each creature, plant, and element has a designated place within the universe’s design. As long as nothing disrupts this delicately balanced web of life, everything flourishes as equal and sacred. Ecofeminism asks us to embrace the Bathtub ideology, while rejecting the broader filmic world of dichotomies, exclusion, and marginalization within which it is found. The film allows viewers to hold this conflict in tension as they journey with Hushpuppy through strangely familiar worlds.

The Third Cinema approach enables viewers to identify with a perspective that may not be their own: that of a single-parented, 5-year-old black girl who lives off the land (or water). Hushpuppy is a child of a marginalized group with no voice in what happens to their community or homeland as a result of human action/inaction in geographical locations not their own. The voices of the Bathtub community were not considered in the decision of whether or not to build the levee

and they are not considered by the civilizations across the world who pollute the air and deplete the ozone, raising the temperature of the earth's surface, melting the polar ice caps and engulfing the bayou island in salty seawater. Viewers who have not had the experience of suffering as a silent voice are positioned to identify with the film's protagonist, Hushpuppy, nonetheless.<sup>20</sup>

The inhabitants of the mainland community would likely tell a different story, the one told by industrialized societies in which development equals advancement equals success and they know what is best for the "ignorant" Bathtub residents. Acting as "custodian of the subversive memory,"<sup>21</sup> *Beasts of the Southern Wild* tells the untold tale, giving a voice to the previously voiceless. Not only is the marginalized community encountered and heard, but their voices transcend the film world and effect afilmic reality. Viewers must reconcile their perspective in the film world with their own lived experience. What communities, human and non-human, may be hurt by one's way of life? What needs to change? How can all live in greater awareness and appreciation of each other for optimal flourishing and fulfillment of creation as a whole?

The answer comes in humanity's ability to recognize itself as beasts who are interconnected with the rest of the natural world, beings who have the unique ability to act with intention and reflection, and beholders who consciously experience wonder and awe in the face of an intricate, miraculous, sacred world. Hushpuppy presents us with a child who is traversing the landscape of this

adventure in self-discovery with humble confidence and grace-filled determination. While simultaneously embodying all three identities (beast, being, beholder), Hushpuppy evolves in her own understanding of her place in the universe and its significance to a perspective egalitarian holism.

### ***Hushpuppy as Beast***

Hushpuppy is raised with keen awareness of the interconnectedness of the ecosystem wherein she resides. Her formation is built on the tension of being utterly dependent upon the natural world, yet unapologetically independent of any human-made resources. In order to appropriately maintain the place of the human within the natural world's design, she must not overpower the non-human community with strategic, industrialized control mechanisms, as have those humans living north of the levy. Instead of dominance, Hushpuppy practices dependence. Voiceover audio and visual imagery throughout the film demonstrate that Hushpuppy understands her humanity as being one beast among many. She does not consider the human as the invincible, authoritative, dominating top of the food chain, but rather as a cooperating and connected strand in the web of life.

Hushpuppy's understanding of the world arises from her lifestyle. Yet, another significant contribution to her perspective is delivered by her adult teachers. Ms. Bathsheba teaches the Bathtub children that the bodies of human beings are no different than the bodies of any other creature:

MS. BATHSHEBA: Meat. Meat, meat. Meat. Every animal is made out of meat. I'm meat. Y'all asses is meat. Everything is part of the buffet of the universe.

To reiterate her point, she tells a story about an ancient, bovine creature called the auroch that would “gobble them cavebabies down right in front of the cave-baby parents,” just as the humans gobble down the crawfish that are currently squirming about on the picnic table in front of them.<sup>22</sup> The eating can easily be the eaten. Everything is meat.

Ms. Bathsheba's lesson is reiterated to film viewers through mise-en-scene. First, the screen is filled with crawfish squirming about on the table. Then, the camera pans across an owl in a cage. Finally, as Ms. Bathsheba tells the tale of the aurochs feasting on humans, a close up of her thigh provides a simple tattoo drawing of the scene she describes. While the stick-figure humans fighting the aurochs may not look “meaty,” the drawing's placement on the teacher's muscular thigh demonstrates that humans are indeed made of meat. While the verbal lesson is informative, it is the setting and surroundings of the event that convince listeners—within and outside of the filmic world—of its truth. All creatures are made of meat.

Johnson's words about the continuity of humanity with the rest of God's creatures echo Ms. Bathsheba's lesson: “Human beings are not aliens parachuted in from some other world but are natural-born members of the community of life germinated out of the depths of the evolutionary process.”<sup>23</sup> Crawfish, owl, auroch,

human, all are creatures created by and subject to the same world. The auroch story ends with reference to the fact that these once powerful creatures were eventually consumed—not by a creaturely predator, but by the natural world’s formation of an ice age. Hushpuppy learns that the “dynamic range of relationships”<sup>24</sup> on which she depends for survival can also be the cause of a species’ demise. Through voiceover after the schoolhouse scene, Hushpuppy makes a strikingly mature connection between the demise of these ancient beasts at the hands of the natural world and the current situation of humanity. While humans may not be in danger of creaturely consumption, their lives could be made impossible by drastic changes in the natural world. For the remainder of the film, the threat of being eaten by an auroch is equated with the threat of climate change—a connection revealed to the viewer both by Hushpuppy’s creative retelling of the aurochs’ story and by its visual juxtaposition to the increasing threat of rising seawaters in her own life. Beyond the blatant declaration that all creatures are made of meat, Ms. Bathsheba has taught the children that all creatures are susceptible to changes in the natural world. Hushpuppy’s lifestyle taught her that this is due to the fact that all creatures, including humans, are an integral part of that natural world.

By observing and journeying with Hushpuppy, viewers are drawn to critique their own modes of existence. Are they existing in harmonious relation with the rest of creation? Are they aware of the “dynamic range of relationships” of which they are an active part? Do they understand their own vulnerability in a

rapidly changing world? Are they mistaking their privilege for preference and unknowingly contributing to the demise of life on earth? What other creatures might they have disregarded and endangered by their uninformed actions? With *Hushpuppy* as guide, viewers contemplate their own connections and influence on the state of the world.

In the months after a big storm alters the Bathtub community, viewers see two contrasting images of the effect this storm has on the land, water, and creatures (including humans) who live there. Initially, life remains abundant, albeit different. The massive storm flooded most of the island (shown by an overhead wide shot). Yet, the few resilient humans who refused to leave their home amid storm predictions are empowered by their survival and resourcefulness. They “make a camp right on top of the Bathtub,” complete with gardens for plants and enclosures for animals that will feed them until the water goes down. Even in this unnatural, floating setting, it is clear that the Bathtub community holds sustainability as a virtue. Like Johnson, the Bathtub inhabitants know that it is because of the human’s place within a grand design that they are able to maintain a role with particular value and purpose. Instead of carelessly collecting plants and feasting while able, a montage shows adults and children building a floating living space, nurturing growth, and respecting limitations. Their residence is a modern “Noah’s Ark,” equipped to see to the survival of creation that could not survive under water.<sup>25</sup> The spirit of resilience and survival is crystallized in a pan-shot of the bayou where a

horse grazes amid abundant, green plant growth on a small island of land that escapes the flood. Hushpuppy gazes upon this scene as she and Wink zoom about in their motorboat. A bountiful catch to share with their community awaits in the uncharacteristically deep waters below. They return to the “ark” with bulging nets of consumable sea life. The landscape of the Bathtub has changed, but perhaps a mix of evolutionary aptitude, conscious adaptation, and attention to relationships will allow these beasts to live.

Though the vitality of the Bathtub community is contagious, it is also during these first days post-storm that Ms. Bathsheba utters a realistic premonition of what is to come: “You know they got salt in that water, gonna eat everything up. Trees are gonna die first, then the animals, then the fish. You gotta think about moving.” Ms. Bathsheba seems to have a working knowledge of the “grand natural system”<sup>26</sup> to which Johnson refers when asserting that the interconnectedness of all creation includes a “dynamic range of relationships—with other members of the same species, with the next generation, with individuals of other species, and with the physical conditions of the environment.”<sup>27</sup> At this time, the other adults seem to adopt an alternate worldview in which humanity stands apart from non-human creation and will not be affected by the ills plaguing the environment and other species. They irritatedly disregard her remarks, appalled that one would suggest relocation due to environmental degradation. Unfortunately, soon, even the most indignant are unable to ignore the adverse effects the storm is having on their

ecosystem. Hushpuppy gives Ms. Bathsheba's remarks a new iteration as she and Wink motorboat past the same protruding landmass from a few scenes before: "Two weeks later, everything started to die." The once lush greenery is browned and bowed. The majestic horse which before stood proud amongst the trees is now bloated, collapsed, and deceased. Fishing nets yield only a waterlogged squirrel carcass. The indication is clear, this is no longer a place suited to life. Again, while Ms. Bathsheba's words are informative, it is the *mise-en-scene* which truly convinces viewers of their truth. The cohesive and cooperating ecosystem has been thrown off balance. It is only a matter of time before the desolation seen here among the plants and non-human creatures travels along the strands of the web of life and manifests amid the human community. The natural world is connected in life and death. Evolution and adaptation will not benefit the Bathtub community here, because sudden immersion in a salty sea was never part of the natural plan.

The shrugging off of Ms. Bathsheba and her ominous premonition serve as example of the disregard for and silencing of many who predict disaster based on their experiences. If one does not occupy a position on the preferential side of hierarchical dualisms, one is not heard. To avoid total destruction, "the focus has to shift to those who have been silenced"<sup>28</sup>—those on the un-preferred end of the dichotomy. Furthermore, people must stop conceptualizing the world as containing "sides" and instead see all stories as speaking to one shared experience and future.



The mainland community north of the levee appears unchanged by the storm because of the levee's disproportionate distribution of water. When Bathtub inhabitants blow a hole in the levy with explosives, the speed with which the water recedes is conveyed to viewers through a stationary, extreme close-up shot of the water's edge lowering out of the frame. Therefore, the cause of the Bathtub's current, desperate situation is not identified as the natural storm, but as the unnatural levee which was built in an attempt to control nature. This realization provides an even starker contrast than the one presented in the previously discussed panoramic scenes, for this contrast is between what happens when humans live in cooperation with nature as the Bathtub inhabitants do (mutual flourishing, survival) and what happens when humans attempt to dominate as the mainland's inhabitants do (misdistribution of resources, death). For one who identifies herself as beast in connection with the natural world as Hushpuppy does, it is no surprise that separating humanity from the natural world is destructive. The levee serves as visual representation of the blinding wall constructed in the perspectives of those living in the industrialized world. They are beasts living estranged from their rightful environment, a reality that (like the levee) has disastrous effects on the community. While abundant life may initially seem possible for those suffering the effects of the levee and those suffering the effects of estrangement from the natural world, neither have found a sustainable solution to the problem of disconnection. While the humans surviving on the mainland may not feel the immediate effects of

their decisions, their neighbors in the Bathtub do, as their own descendants will. The “grand natural system” transcends time and space.<sup>29</sup> Destruction will be felt by all.

Ecofeminist theology ponders the effects of considering situations in holistic ways. While the adverse effects of the levy may only be immediately felt by those living to its south, eventually the effects of human efforts to control non-human nature will be felt by all creation. A time will come when even wealth and privilege will not be enough to escape the fatal effects of ecological injustice. Those in positions of power, those making decisions, need to heed ecofeminist theology’s admonition to think and act holistically for the survival of the planet and those calling it home. Here, the mainland inhabitants must listen to the voices they have silenced and respond appropriately to the full reality, not just their own experiences.

While humans north of the levy may have forgotten that they are part of a grander system of life than humanity alone, Hushpuppy maintains acute awareness of the interconnectedness among creatures throughout her existence. Viewers first see this in the opening scene, when Hushpuppy listens to the small bird’s heartbeat. The visual representation of Hushpuppy recognizing the heartbeat in the bird is accompanied by her voiceover, explaining the connection she detects.

HUSHPUPPY: All the time, everywhere, thing’s hearts is beatin’ and squirtin’ and talking to each other in ways I can’t understand. Most of the time they probably be saying, “I’m hungry,” or “I gotta poop.” But sometimes, they be talkin’ in codes.

Hushpuppy's recognition of a common heartbeat among creatures becomes a leitmotif throughout the film. We later see her place a chick, a chicken, a crab, and a leaf next to her ear as well. Unlike the bird which she nurturingly cared for, the crab and the leaf become meals shortly thereafter (and viewers assume the chick and the chicken do as well). Furthermore, several times, Hushpuppy leans in to hear the heartbeat within other humans. She naturally considers humans as part of the community of life, not above or outside of it. The first time Hushpuppy focuses on a human heartbeat is after she confronts Wink about the state of his health. As a fatigued Wink lays down to rest, Hushpuppy lies down with him, her head resting on his chest. The faint sound of a heartbeat swells in the soundtrack. She again listens to a weak human heartbeat in the homeless shelter/health clinic north of the levee. She concludes that, here, "when an animal [human] gets sick, they plug it into the wall." She approaches one of the "plugged in" humans to see if the heart is still beating. As Hushpuppy's ear rests on the person's chest, a feeble beat is heard. She retracts, then leans forward again, this time toward the person's ear, "They're coming for you," she whispers. Viewers are not quite sure who "they" are, but given Hushpuppy's internal monologue after discovering Wink's illness earlier in the film, she could be referring to "strong animals." Whether the "strong animals" referenced are the aurochs, which represent climate change, or the healthy humans who attempt to maintain power over life and death is for the viewer to decide.

Ecofeminism recognizes these threats as the same, presenting recognition of the need for egalitarian holism which promotes care and concern for community members who are struggling instead of stoic maintenance of their bodies or assistance in their demise. Viewers see the alternative, holistic way of dealing with ailment in the penultimate scene, when Hushpuppy once again listens to a fragile heartbeat. After courageously joining Wink in his final moments of life and sharing in a communal meal with him, Hushpuppy once again lays with her head on his chest. This time, the heartbeat is heard for a moment before fading into silence. Hushpuppy's recognition of all creature's interconnectedness in life enters into death as well. From her pets, to her meals, to her loved ones, Hushpuppy hears the heartbeat of the universe pounding in unison. But if it is ignored, it is easily forgotten, banishing all hope of the human identifying as beast as Hushpuppy does.

If humanity does not recognize its interconnectedness with the rest of the created world and its utter dependence on non-human creation for existing, it is easy for humans to think that they maintain superiority over non-human creation. This quickly expands to privileged humans thinking that they maintain superiority over vulnerable human groups as well. The conceptual framework of hierarchical dualism encourages this dualistic thinking where either one group or the other may flourish but never both. On the contrary, a worldview of egalitarian holism allows for creation to be conceptualized as a web of life comprised of many relationships between equally important individual creations. Egalitarian holism recognizes the

interconnected heartbeat of the world, the evolutionary capacity of creation existing in relation, and the shared vulnerability of all life. By first recognizing humanity's identity as beast, one is then able to progress into further anthropological nuances with a foundational understanding of belonging and purpose in Earth's community.

### ***Hushpuppy the Being***

Hushpuppy's awareness of her interconnected nature as beast is evident throughout the film; self-awareness of her identity as being evolves significantly. It is in this identity that viewers watch Hushpuppy grow and change as she experiences life and death in the Bathtub. Hushpuppy is comfortable with the idea that events happen in relation to each other. She is not so comfortable with her ability to affect or address certain events in ways that do not seem natural to her. She is different than other beasts because she is also a being with the ability to act with intention and reflect upon actions taken. Instinct does not obligate her to deal with a situation in any certain way. Wink has taught Hushpuppy to be strong. In preparing for Wink's absence, she learns that she is also powerful.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* makes a connection between the ancient aurochs and the impending threat of global climate change. Arguably, Hushpuppy makes this connection as well. However, while the scenes of the aurochs run parallel to the story of the storm and the Bathtub's response to it, they punctuate the story of Wink's illness and eventual death, suggesting that for Hushpuppy the

end of the world will not be when earth is made uninhabitable by natural disasters, but when her father dies. The morning after the storm, she gives a nod to this eschatological perspective: “For the animals that didn’t have a dad to put them in a boat, the end of the world already happened.” While subtle, this line makes a direct connection between Wink’s presence in her life and the fact that her world has not yet ended. Furthermore, audiovisual representation of the aurochs at key moments of discovery about Wink’s health convincingly suggests this connection in Hushpuppy’s mind. It is through Hushpuppy’s ponderings and engagement with the aurochs (around Wink’s death) that viewers witness her self-discovery as being.

During the initial hints of Wink’s illness, Hushpuppy first realizes her ability to affect reality. One day she awakens to find an empty house. She is sure her father will soon reappear, but when she returns from school and he remains absent, she becomes concerned. When he finally reappears, an interaction between daughter and dad ensues that significantly impacts Hushpuppy, her view of the world, and her place in it. Upset with Wink for leaving her without warning and hurt by his harsh demeanor upon his return, Hushpuppy uncharacteristically insults Wink. Eyebrows scrunched in anger, she balls her fist and strikes his chest. Wink loses his breath, clutches his chest, and collapses on the forest floor, unconscious. The sky is blue, but immediately thunder cracks and the scene cuts to a shot of giant ice boulders cracking apart rupturously and falling into the sea. Viewers are returned to the forest setting, where Hushpuppy looks at the sky before fleeing the

scene. “I think I broke something,” Hushpuppy calls out. Viewers know that while mighty, the small child does not possess the strength to actually inflict injury upon her father. The reality of this knowledge matters little to the meaning of the scene. Several shots later, Hushpuppy returns to the wooded area with medicine for the unconscious Wink and finds he has disappeared. A now floating, ominous chunk of ice fills the screen, a frozen auroch visible at its core. Editing makes a direct connection between Wink’s illness and the aurochs. Additionally, Hushpuppy associates her own actions as having influence on a situation. Unfortunately, upon reflecting on these particular actions, Hushpuppy realizes that their effect was not her intent. The ability to conceptualize actions in this way brings with it a responsibility to thoroughly contemplate possible outcomes.

The next time viewers meet the aurochs, they have escaped their ice prisons as Wink disappears in the midst of “combatting” the great storm in the middle of the night. The aurochs begin walking toward the Bathtub when Hushpuppy detects abnormally dark and protruding veins branching out from Wink’s chest, barely visible at his tanktop’s edge. Not long after, she realizes the veins are growing along Wink’s arm and neck as he sleeps; the massive aurochs charge through a town, destroying everything in their path. As Wink’s illness worsens and Hushpuppy’s awareness of his ailment increases, the aurochs become closer, faster, and more threatening. The end of her world draws near.

The most telling depiction of Hushpuppy's realization of her identification as being comes in the stark contrast between the final two meetings with the aurochs. The penultimate auroch scene is grotesque. Hushpuppy and Wink have just had an honest conversation about his condition and what it means for Hushpuppy's future.

HUSHPUPPY: You gonna be dead?

WINK: No.

HUSHPUPPY: You gonna leave me alone?

WINK: No, I ain't gonna leave you alone.

HUSHPUPPY: Because if you be gone, I be gone too.

WINK: No, that's not how it work...

HUSHPUPPY: I ain't gonna be dead?

WINK: Nah, you'll probably live a hundred years more... You ain't the one that's sick.

As father and daughter settle down to rest, Hushpuppy ponders what she's been told, thinking: "Strong animals got no mercy. They're the type of animals that eat their own mamas and daddies." The carcass of a dead auroch fills the foreground of a dreary scene. Other aurochs grunt and mill about behind the dead beast. One draws near and begins feasting on its perished herdmate, without emotion or mercy. These beasts do whatever is required to survive. Is Hushpuppy to act in accordance with this same merciless drive for self-preservation? Identifying as an interconnected beast of nature, "as intrinsic part of the evolutionary network of life on our planet,"<sup>30</sup> she may have no choice. But, identifying also as a being with intention, reflection, and the power to control primitive instincts, perhaps there is another way to approach death. Will Hushpuppy discover love as "the meaning



encoded at the core of the human”<sup>31</sup> or will the evolution of her identity rest at beast?

Viewers do not see the aurochs again until near the end of the story. Hushpuppy knows that she has options. She could stay with her father and face whatever awaits her in the Bathtub after Wink’s death or she could ignore Wink’s livelihood in favor of self-centered interests, like the aurochs of the previous encounter. This opportunity presents itself when the Bathtub community escapes the mainland shelter/clinic. She could board a bus to an unknown fostercare facility, avoiding further witness of Wink’s deteriorating health. In passionately revealing her aversion to this option with Wink, she realizes it is not just witnessing his ailing health that she would avoid by taking this route, but also witnessing his death.

WINK: I’m dyin.’ My blood’s eatin’ itself. You know what that mean?

HUSHPUPPY: Don’t be sayin’ things about dyin.’

WINK: Everybody daddies die.

HUSHPUPPY: Not my daddy.

WINK: Yeah, your daddy. I didn’t want you to have to watch that. Ok? You understand?

Wink falls to the ground, coughing up deep red blood. Hushpuppy’s eyes are fixed on her father. Does she really have what it takes to confront dying and death? She isn’t sure, but she recognizes her ability to choose whether she stays or goes.

Upon returning to the Bathtub after their escape from the shelter/clinic, Hushpuppy leads a group of girls in an adventure away from the Bathtub yet again, this time to a floating crab shack that boasts of “Girls, Girls, Girls.” Her intent

seems to be to escape the Bathtub and proximity to her ailing father in hopes of joining her mysterious mother in another world.<sup>32</sup> After meeting a plucky chef who may or may not embody what the young girl seeks, Hushpuppy reconsiders. Taking with her a carefully packaged meal of deep-fried alligator nuggets, reminiscent of the ones remembered by Wink as Hushpuppy's mama's famous dish, the child and her "herd" embark on their return trip. The crab shack will not become home. While initially, Hushpuppy felt compelled to flee Wink's dying and death so as not to become witness to it, she now realizes another option. She can accompany Wink through his dying and death, not as an onlooker, but as a companion. In sharing with him her "mother's" famous alligator dish, it is as if Momma is accompanying them as well. The family is brought together in one, final, communal meal. Not a meal which feasts on the flesh of the deceased, but a meal that sacramentalizes an interconnectedness that transcends time and space and a conscious decision to be together.<sup>33</sup>

It is in the midst of this deliberate return home and last meal with her dying father that Hushpuppy encounters the aurochs for the final time. As she and the other girls race home, the aurochs traverse a parallel path—swimming across the swampy waters, stampeding along the grassy shore, rounding the final hilltop. Outside of the shanty where Wink lies, Hushpuppy and the aurochs finally come face to face. The other girls run, but Hushpuppy stands with feet planted firmly on the ground. The aurochs bow to her tiny frame. Nose to nose with that which

threatens her world, a courageous Hushpuppy chooses companionship and solidarity instead of comfort and self-interest. “You’re my friend, kind of,” she says to the aurochs, who then turn and exit the scene for the last time.

Hushpuppy realizes that her choices matter. Like all humans experiencing deterioration of their world, “The time is past when [she] could ignore the impact of [her] behavior.”<sup>34</sup> She can positively or negatively affect the world in which she lives. As her agency is part of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*’s story, “human agency is now part of the evolutionary story. The future of the tree of life is now at the mercy of human decision and indecision.”<sup>35</sup> Fully aware of this, humans must make responsible decisions, as Hushpuppy does. Ignoring unpleasant situations will not make them go away; it will simply result in not being a part of their resolutions. On the contrary, actively engaging with difficult situations and making the choice to act in solidarity with those who are hurting yields growth, companionship and fulfillment—not just for the individual in focus, but for those around her as well. Ownership of her agency allows Hushpuppy to experience unity anew. Owning responsibility with compassion can lead humans of today’s warming, waning world to unity as well.

Ecofeminist theology recognizes the role reversal of Hushpuppy and Wink as one of great significance. The young, dependent girl has become the compassionate caretaker. The mature, independent man now requires care. This evolution in identity is not allowed by hierarchical dualism, where everything and

everyone hold defined roles and identities in an unchanging system. Furthermore, an anthropocentric worldview, which encourages humanity to dominate and control natural processes, would have had Wink remain in the shelter/clinic (even if it meant separation from his family and home) and be hooked up to machines in an attempt to control how he dies. Hushpuppy would not have been challenged in her capacity to care and make compassionate decisions. Wink would not have experienced the joy of knowing Hushpuppy has grown into more than what he hoped she would become—“the king of the Bathtub,” a powerful being who can take care of herself, but also who, with passionate determination, chooses to care for others as well.

Because of her identity as being, Hushpuppy is able to actively participate in meaningful decision making. Viewers must grapple with ownership of the decisions they have actively made or with which they have passively cooperated in reality. Human beings, by virtue of their relation to the rest of the created world, have an impact on its status. Because of humanity’s ability to observe, reflect, and predict in informed ways, it has a responsibility to make life-affirming decisions. Like Hushpuppy, Christians are called to choose compassion and solidarity with heartfelt determination and resolute conviction that it is what is best for humanity and what is best for the world.

### ***Hushpuppy the Beholder***

Hushpuppy's astute recognition of her role as beast in relationship with all existence and profound growth in her role as being with responsibility and influence situate her to embody the third component of human identity—beholder. In *Ask the Beasts*, the examples of Moses, Darwin, and Johnson demonstrate ways in which humans can behold. Hushpuppy displays attributes of all three. While never explicitly mentioning God, with attention to the transcendent, she beholds divinity in the world around her, wonders at creation's miraculous design, reaches across temporal divides, and seeks solace in a force greater than that of which the world alone is capable.

Moses is a prophet traditionally believed to have written the first five books of the Bible. Christians often turn to these books for enlightenment on God and creation's relationship to the divine. There is enlightenment to be gained through scripture, but as Augustine once said, scripture is not Christians' only source of revelation: "You can read what Moses wrote; in order to write it, what did Moses read, a man living in time? Observe heaven and earth in a religious spirit."<sup>36</sup> While 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians have the revelation of scripture to consult, this particularly rich resource was not always available to Christians of the past. Revelation was encountered in the book of nature and, for Christians, eventually in the human beast, being, and beholder, Jesus Christ.

Similarly to Moses, Hushpuppy wants to record her experiences for future generations to know and build upon. Several times, she notes that her existence will be known by people in the future. Her first efforts to communicate with future generations are pictorial crayon recordings on cardboard boxes, graphic depictions of interaction and emotion. “I ain’t gonna be forgotten,” she says. “I’m recordin’ my story for the scientists in the future. In a million years, when kids go to school, they gonna know that once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub.” As her shanty-house goes up in flames, viewers know that these recordings of cardboard and wax will not survive, yet Hushpuppy retains resolve that her existence is embedded in the story of the universe. In the ultimate scene, she recites nearly the same words: “When I die, the scientists of the future, they’re gonna find it all. They’re gonna know, once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub.” This time, future knowledge of her existence is not dependent upon her personal recordings of events, but on her participation in a grand design of life which will continue to flourish. As particles whisk about in the air and light that surround her, she recognizes her place in a sacred world. She beholds the past and present and knowingly contributes to what will be beheld by those in the future.

While the narrative and audio are the same, growth in understanding of her own significance is conveyed by the very different visual representations. The first—cardboard and crayon—is tangible and fixed. The second—dancing light and

swirling particles—is transcendent and fluid. Beholding creation and one’s place within it is an active and ever changing experience. While some may eloquently record their experiences to share with others, at its core, beholding is a personal experience unique to each person. Even those who do not intentionally record their existence for future generations will leave a lasting impression of cosmological significance.

Although Darwin’s scientific method did not permit God as an explanatory hypothesis, Johnson notes that “Charles Darwin loved the natural world. Gifted with remarkable powers of observation, he poured his attention on organisms large and small, captivated by how they looked, functioned and interrelated with each other. Bugs, barnacles, birds, bromeliads: whatever he saw awakened wonder.”<sup>37</sup> In situations where many would simply see a barren field or a foreign flower or a similarity in species, Darwin could behold the intricate workings of creation so intensely that he made connections between plant, animal, and landscape that highlighted the relationships among the various aspects of creation and more fully explained the situation. Darwin was convinced that relationships among plants, animals, and landscapes were the most important factor in determining the past, present, and future of each form. Once these relationships were uncovered, one could better examine one’s own place among this community of life, recognizing instances of help and hindrance to the process of these natural systems. Johnson

suggests “that this quality of seeing the world with attentive and loving care is profoundly religious.”<sup>38</sup>

Like Darwin, Hushpuppy beholds the interconnected nature of the world with remarkable attention to detail. She lives in a way which makes the world’s harmony and discord matters of life or death. For viewers who have not lived in such close proximity to the natural world and are not so vividly aware of their dependence on it, the film’s cinematography allows them to hear and see with Hushpuppy’s senses as she tenderly listens to beating hearts, observes mutual flourishing, and experiences how environmental degradation leads to human suffering.

Hushpuppy’s solemn voiceover throughout the film drives a narrative of something broken at human hands, which even when fixed will leave effects of its prior brokenness. She repeatedly expresses the idea that things were designed and intended to fit together and function in a certain way: “The entire universe depends on everything fitting together just right.” When things don’t fit together right, the universe becomes broken. At first, she thinks that repairing brokenness means returning to how things were prior to it: “If you can fix the broken piece, everything can go right back.” Upon putting this theory into practice (by blowing a hole in the levy which obstructs the water’s natural flow patterns), she realizes that a return to the past is never possible. That would be contrary to the original design which allows for evolution based on relation and time. Hushpuppy falsely feels that



inability to return to its prior state means the universe will forever stay broken: “Sometimes you can break something so bad that it can’t get put back together.” This conception of reality is disheartening, but because Hushpuppy has made a habit of keenly beholding the world around her and therefore has made herself acutely aware of the impact the seemingly most insignificant factors can have on a community, she does not remain in despair. While the universe cannot be put back together to exist as before, this does not mean that relationships cannot be restored: “When you’re small, you gotta fix what you can.” Little by little, Hushpuppy addresses brokenness in her midst with knowledge of the effect each small interaction in the created world has on the grand design. Inability to return to a state of the past is a benefit, not a shortcoming. With the active participation of every creature, the universe moves forward: “I see that I’m a little piece of a big, big universe. And that makes things right.” By moving forward, aware of and changed by the past, brokenness leads to togetherness experienced anew. Things can again be right. Without scientific terminology, Hushpuppy comes to understand the interconnections of creation much like Darwin did through the ability to behold.

Johnson also holds that the desire to understand the world can broaden and deepen our understanding of God and God’s presence in the world. “Religious contemplation ratchets up what is at stake because it sees the world thus appreciated as God’s handiwork, a place of encounter with the divine.”<sup>39</sup> Beholding the natural world from a purely scientific standpoint allows one to gaze with wonder and awe

at the intricate, perfect structure within which creation exists, adapts and flourishes, but “the presence of the Creator Spirit...is not discernible by scientific method or instrument, nor can it be thematized as part of any scientific theory.”<sup>40</sup> The ability to see God in the world is a conscious decision on the part of the beholder. Once the choice is made to see the divine in all things, it is difficult to imagine them as anything less.

The inner secret of the entangled bank is the dwelling of God’s Spirit within it. Instead of being distant from what is holy, the natural world bears the mark of the sacred, being itself imbued with a spiritual presence ... Earth is a physical place of extravagant dynamism that bodies forth the gracious presence of God.<sup>41</sup>

To truly be a beholder means to recognize that when one appears to be beholding the world, in fact, one is beholding the glory of God.

Because Hushpuppy does not recognize “God,” it would be inaccurate to say that she observes God dwelling in her world. However, cinematography suggests that “Mama” functions for Hushpuppy as a type of God-figure.<sup>42</sup> Since Hushpuppy has no memories of “Mama,” all she knows is that she had a part in Hushpuppy’s creation and her presence is supposedly too perfect to describe. When stories about “Mama” are told, the frame takes on an ethereal feel—soft focus, bright, with tiny lights. These same descriptors characterize the kitchen scene of Hushpuppy and the cook at Elysian Fields. Whether the cook is Hushpuppy’s biological mother or not, this scene further supports the theory that Hushpuppy’s idea of “Mama” serves as a God-figure for her. When Hushpuppy enters the kitchen

with “Mama,” the double doors swing open to a blinding light—imagery often used to signify one’s entering “heaven.” After a cathartic kitchen meeting, Hushpuppy moves confidently in the direction of “Mama’s” will, bringing a bit of the sacred experience with her in the meal to be shared with a dying Wink.

If “Mama’s” presence is made known by light and dancing particles, then “Mama” is indeed present in all that Hushpuppy beholds. Even when she can’t see “Mama’s” presence, voiceover informs viewers that all she must do is close her eyes to know that God is there and that everything is alright.

HUSHPUPPY: When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard, it goes away. But when it all goes quiet, I see they are right here.

Without Hushpuppy ever using the word “God,” cinematography, editing, and voiceover narration suggest that the child delicately beholds sacredness dwelling in the world and recognizes it as such. This sacred presence—this Holy Spirit—makes her feel comfort, belonging, and hope. Furthermore, it leads her to selflessly love. Visually depicted as softness, light, and dancing movement, Hushpuppy, indeed, beholds God.

### ***Hushpuppy as Beast, Being, and Beholder***

Through attentive observance of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*'s cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound, music, editing, and acting, one journeys with Hushpuppy through the self-discovery of her human identity as beast, being, and beholder within the created world's miraculous design. While discussed in succession, these identities are embodied simultaneously, held in tension with each other and with everything else to which Hushpuppy exists in relation—element, creature, and God.

A worldview of egalitarian holism allows this human, as representative of humanity, to grow and flourish along with the rest of the created word, not instead of it. Where hierarchical dualism would require the suppression and degradation of one (e.g., nature, the poor, women, marginalized communities) for the superiority and success of the other (humanity, the wealthy, men, elevated communities), egalitarian holism “affirms that all of nature is interdependent and interconnected, an interlocking and delicate web of diversity. Every facet of each ecosystem that comprises the biosphere has inherent worth.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, “egalitarian holism does not promote equality among species that reduces everything to sameness,” leaving Hushpuppy's—and humanity's—identity only as that of beasts.<sup>44</sup> Rather, within a conceptual framework of egalitarian holism, “each has a role to play in Earth's web of life.”<sup>45</sup> Hushpuppy realizes this first in how her father cares for her and then in the way that she is able to care for others. Humanity's unique identifiers as being

and beholder in addition to beast differentiate humans from other parts of creation and support the Christian belief and role of being made in the image and likeness of God.<sup>46</sup> Humanity must exist in harmony with all that is if it is to adequately live out this privileged role.

The concept of identifying humans as beasts, beings, and beholders within the framework of egalitarian holism is presented in *Ask the Beasts*, where Johnson writes eloquently about relationships among creation and the importance of existing in harmony. However, when this idea is presented with realistic creativity in the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, it is experienced aesthetically, in a way which text and paper alone are unable to convey. The audiovisual representation offered by filmic depiction caters to humans' experiential nature. Viewers are invited into a familiar yet fictitious setting that with gentle force asks what is right and what is wrong with *this* world. An authentic response to the question may be clouded by reality, but by asking the beasts of the southern wild one engages the question afresh, with the eyes, ears, and heart of a girl named Hushpuppy, who lived with her daddy in the Bathtub. Indeed, her presence has been made known by the telling of her tale and the contributions of her cinematic existence. She encourages viewers' awareness of all childrens/creatures/creations' significant existences and their necessary contributions to the interconnected, mutually dependent, meticulously designed web of life we all share.

## Conclusions

Through exploring the idea of human identity as beast, being, and beholder as presented in *Ask the Beasts*, we can embrace a worldview of egalitarian holism in place of hierarchical dualism, seeing that the former is better suited to living in accordance with God's will as defined by ecofeminist Christian theology. Through recognizing human identity as one of beast, being, and beholder in *Hushpuppy*, we see the realistic benefits and consequences of choosing to live in harmony with the natural world or attempting to control it. Considered together, we can reach a holistic position which values creation because it is of God and because each aspect is vitally important. Holding this position, one desires to live in harmony with the created world to both follow God's will and ensure the livelihood and flourishing of all. It is what is right. It is what is just. It is what is expected and required of those made in the image and likeness of God. Awareness of *Hushpuppy*'s specific, lived experience (which categorically represents the lived experience of countless individuals on the planet) informs Johnson's ecofeminist theology in concrete ways while recognition of theological themes raised by *Beasts of the Southern Wild* leads one to recognize the dwelling of the divine in an ostensibly secular film. *Ask the Beasts* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* are enhanced by consideration of the other.

Unlike Johnson's theology, the film's sharp visual and narrative juxtaposition of life north and south of the levy supports a dualistic way of thinking about the world. For this reason, it does not fully support that for which ecofeminist

egalitarian holism calls. Still, the film contributes something worthwhile to the conversation because it subverts the typical hierarchy expected of the context. Whereas in reality, the mainland (wealthy, developed, white) community receives preference and power in Western civilization's current system of hierarchical dualism, in the world of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, it is the bayou (impoverished, undeveloped, majority black) community with which viewers find themselves siding. The Bathtub's inhabitants maintain control of their lives and viewers' hearts, commanding compassion that is often absent in actuality. This is Hushpuppy's story and one would be hard-pressed to find a viewer who does not champion the petite yet powerful protagonist. Therefore, although the film suggests dualistic thinking, it offers something Johnson's book does not in holding up the experiences of a young, black, uneducated girl rather than those of a mature, white, educated man (Charles Darwin).<sup>47</sup> Though perhaps dualistically, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* tells the untold story, giving voice to the voiceless.

Some people may be discontent with the film's seeming anthropocentrism. The narrative revolves around the livelihood of the *people* living in the Bathtub. This could be interpreted as placing humanity at the center of society's conceptual framework. However, such an uncritical conclusion neglects that offered by the film's visual and audio components—features that must be considered for an adequate dialogue between film and theology. The camera routinely focuses on close-ups of the world wherein the human community lives and sweeps across

panoramas of the landscape. This suggests a holistic concept of the intricate and expansive ecosystem to which humanity belongs. Voiceovers of Hushpuppy's musings endorse the idea that humans are but one part of an interconnected universe, albeit an important one. With attention to these audio and visual characteristics that are imperative to sufficient film study, one can conclude that the conceptual framework supported by *Beasts of the Southern Wild* can be egalitarian holism.

Egalitarian holism can exist as a secular concept. Placing the conversation within the context of theological discussion, however, emphasizes its importance for theists. Replacing hierarchical dualism with egalitarian holism is important not only because it is what leads to survival and flourishing for all, but more crucially because it is the will of God. Conceiving of existence thus and acting accordingly may save the world, and it might just save our souls as well.

It is my hope that by engaging audio, visual, and written representations of an issue that affects all life on this planet, seemingly diametrical schools of thought and communities of people may feel drawn to participate in a common conversation. The life of Hushpuppy is important because she is a child, a female, a black person, a human being. The life of the tree, the ocean, the chicken, the fish, the fly that share the bayou with her are also important. Why? Because Hushpuppy and her surroundings exist in relationships of mutual dependence; Because Hushpuppy and her surroundings are all created by God. Through the specific



example of Hushpuppy and her community, shared with the world through cinematic excellence and illuminated by Johnson's theology, eyes can be opened to experiences of survival, growth and flourishing, minds can be opened to building more just realities, and hearts can be opened to beholding God dwelling within all existence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, directed by Ben Zeitlin, 2012. USA: Fox Searchlight. Film.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> For more on the idea of film as sacramentalizing, see Stephanie Clary's "Rahner at the Oscars: A Sacramentology of Film," *Theophilus Blog*, published February 24, 2015, accessed July 21, 2018, <https://theophilusjournal.wordpress.com>.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the one-act play, "Juicy and Delicious," by Lucy Alibar, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is the first feature-length project of director Benh Zeitlin and Court 13 Pictures and the first feature of cinematographer Ben Richardson. The film's \$1.3 million budget was financed by New York City nonprofit, Cinereach. Zeitlin's family and friends supported and collaborated on the film's production. His sister (Eliza Zeitlin), college classmates (Michael Gottwald, Dan Janvey), hometown neighbor (Crockett Doob), and friend (Dan Romer) assisting with art, production, editing, and music, respectively ("Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012) - Trivia - IMDb," *IMDb.com*, accessed July 15, 2016, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2125435/trivia?ref\\_=tt\\_ql\\_2](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2125435/trivia?ref_=tt_ql_2)).

<sup>5</sup> Quvenzhané Wallis was 5 years old during auditions. She was 7 years old by the time of the film's completion. Director Benh Zeitlin credits Wallis' mother, Quylindrea Wallis, for contributing to the child's success in the role. (Ibid.)

<sup>6</sup> Dwight Henry owned and operated a bakery across the street from where pre-production operations were taking place. He auditioned for a role at Zeitlin's request, but then declined the part of Wink when it was later offered to him. Finally, at the urging of every member of the film's cast and crew, Henry agreed to the role of Wink only if they would rehearse with him during his middle-of-the-night baking hours. (Ibid.)

<sup>7</sup> Anne M. Clifford, "When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly: An Ecofeminist Proposal for Solidarity," in *The Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 176.

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<sup>8</sup> Anne M. Clifford, "Feminist Perspectives on Ecology," in *Introducing Feminist Theology*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 225.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Carr, "Theological Anthropology and the Experience of Women," in *Transforming Grace* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 123-125.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford, "Feminist Perspectives on Ecology," 225-226.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, xv.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, xv.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>18</sup> "The only critical theory of film birthing from a milieu outside of Europe and the United States, Third Cinema does not so much allude to the geographical origins of a given film as it does a film's dedication to an authentic representation of Third World peoples who struggle to become agents of their own history in the postcolonial aftermath" (Antonio D. Sison, *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus* (New York: Routledge: 2012), 69).

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the developed world through Hushpuppy's eyes, see Kette Thomas' "Society's Belly of the Whale," in "With an Eye on a Set of New Eyes." (Kette Thomas, "With An Eye On A Set Of New Eyes: Beasts of the Southern Wild," *Journal of Religion & Film* 17, Iss. 2, Article 6 (2013): <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss2/6>.)

<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, some scholars feel *Beasts of the Southern Wild's* situating of its story from Hushpuppy's perspective presents a "fetishistic view of poverty, in which being poor is a glamorized state of being." (David Walker, "Beasts of the Southern Wild and Squalor Porn: Examining Cinema's Preferred View of the Black Existence in America," *Badazzmofo.com*, accessed May 02, 2013, <http://www.badazzmofo.com/2012/12/10/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-and-squalor-porn-examining-cinemas-preferred-view-of-the-black-existence-in-america/>.)

<sup>21</sup> Antonio Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

<sup>22</sup> In reality, the auroch was an herbivore. This fact holds little importance to the "truth" of Ms. Bathsheba's lesson.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 235.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 52.

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<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the story of the Great Flood as prophetic warning and guide for humanity's role in creation's survival see Stephanie Clary, "Noah the Environmentalist: The Great Flood and Ecological Justice Today," *Millennial Journal*, published September 14, 2017, accessed October 27, 2018, <https://millennialjournal.com/2017/09/14/noah-the-environmentalist-the-great-flood-and-ecological-justice-today/>.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 101.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-196.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>32</sup> The shack's name, Elysian Fields, alludes to this other-worldly dimension. In Greek mythology, Elysian Fields referred to the afterlife.

<sup>33</sup> For a more in-depth look at the role of food in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, see Antonio Sison's "The Buffet of the Universe," in *The Sacred Foodways of Film*. (Sison, *The Sacred Foodways of Film*, 91-112.)

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 284.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>36</sup> Saint Augustine of Hippo, 354-430, "Sermon 68:6," *Sermons* III/3, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 225-226.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>42</sup> This, of course, immediately subverts the patriarchal idea of God primarily as "father" and forces the viewer into conceptualizing the divine in non-normative ways.

<sup>43</sup> Clifford, "Feminist Perspectives on Ecology," 225-226.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>47</sup> Kette Thomas discusses the many ways in which Hushpuppy deconstructs dichotomies and speaks for the often voiceless in “With an Eye on a Set of New Eyes.” (Thomas, “With an Eye on a Set of New Eyes.”)

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